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County Agent's Notes: Take care of yourself in the heat - August 2, 1999

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County Agent's Notes:

August 2, 1999

Take care of yourself in the heat.

Experiences we have often remind us of things we may have overlooked. I had one of those experiences this past weekend while attending a family gathering. Many of the people attending were very sensitive to the extreme heat. This prompted me to do a little research on the subject of avoiding heat injury. No matter how "tough" we may think we are, there are some things we should consider as we go about our daily activities.

High temperatures can cause abnormal stress on your body. When your body temperature rises even a few degrees above normal level of 98.6 F, you can have muscle cramps, become weak and disoriented, and dangerously ill unless you can help your body cool down. Should your body temperature rise above 105 F, the injury can be fatal.

Also be aware of the humidity. When relative humidity approaches 100 percent, water does not evaporate rapidly, and the normal cooling effect of sweating does not happen. We may be deceived into thinking that the cool early-morning period is safe for activities, but since humidity is normally high at this time the danger is still there. People who work in hot humid environments must take special precautions against heat stress.

Acclimation: Get used to the heat.

The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) suggests that those who are exposed to extreme heat gradually get used to this environment over at least a one week

period. Start off slow, doing about half the work of those used to the heat. Each day, you may increase your workload until you are able to cope with the situation.

Drink Water Frequently:

Sweating is one of the ways your body cools itself. Sweating is obviously water loss, and the only way to replace the loss and continue to help your body cool itself is to drink water frequently. Ideally, you should drink at least eight ounces of water every 20 to 30 minutes while working or playing in the heat.

Wear The Right Clothing:

Proper clothing for hot conditions include garments made from “breathable” fabrics, light in color. A wide-brimmed hat will also help keep you cool and prevent sunburn.

Take A Lot Of Breaks:

Breaks in your activities allow your body to “catch up” on cooling itself. Do not overexert yourself, especially when you are not used to the activity. Ever wonder why lazy folks usually live longer; this may be part of the answer. Take a tip from them when it’s hot because most of the things we do are not worth risking our lives.

Schedule Work To Avoid The Heat:

There is really no way to completely avoid the dangers of heat if you have to work. However, you should schedule your more stressful activities during the cooler parts of the day. The direct rays of the sun are most harmful between the hours of 10AM and 4PM, so work around that period, and avoid direct sunlight whenever possible.

Major heat stress injuries and illnesses include:

Heat Rash, which is caused by plugged sweat glands. It is a bumpy red rash that itches severely. Washing regularly, keeping the skin clean will help with this.

Heat Cramps are painful muscle cramps caused by loss of body salt through sweating. Historically, salt tablets have been taken to avoid this, but you should check with your doctor before using these.

Heat Syncopy, (pronounced “sin-co-pay”) is sudden fainting caused by reduced blood flow to the head. The skin will be cool and moist, and pulse will be weak. Immediate medical attention is needed for syncopy.

Heat Exhaustion is similar to syncopy, but the person is conscious. The victim may be tired, confused, clumsy, irritable, and have blurred vision and rapid breathing. Medical attention is needed. Keep the victim cool and offer sips of water while conscious.

Heat Stroke is the most dangerous form of heat stress. Body temperature will rise, and the skin will be dry, and the victim may complain of headache and dizziness. Medical attention is needed. Keep the victim cool and offer sips of water while conscious.

Avoid working alone in the heat because you may not know you are suffering from heat stress, but if you feel bad in the heat get cooled down and drink water slowly. Call a friend to let them know you are having a problem. You may be able to save yourself.

Above all, use common sense, and don't take chances. Be cool.....